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ABSTRACT

The program described is designed to sensitize elementary students to the needs of persons with handicaps. The program includes six 45-minute teaching units presented to fourth and fifth graders by staff members who have daily contact with special needs students. Presentations include an introductory puppet show using almost life-sized replicas of children with handicaps to convey specific information about each handicap. The next three units address learning disabilities, physical handicaps, deafness, and mental retardation. Each section describes the sequence of activities and areas of emphases. Analysis of pre- and post-test attitude measures is summarized. The paper concludes with a discussion of the teacher's role in the program. (CL)

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UNDERSTANDING HANDICAPS:  
A PROGRAM DESIGNED TO SENSITIZE ELEMENTARY STUDENTS  
TOWARD PEOPLE WITH HANDICAPS

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The Understanding Handicaps program in the Quincy Public Schools is designed to sensitize elementary students to persons with handicaps. The program includes six forty-five minute teaching units presented to fourth and fifth grade classes throughout the school system by professional members of the staff who have daily contact with special needs students. The presentations include an introductory puppet presentation and units on learning disabilities, physical handicaps, deafness, mental retardation, and visual handicaps.

The first presentation portrays children with handicaps through the use of the "Kids on the Block"<sup>1</sup> puppets. These puppets, provided by V.I.A. - the Volunteer Information Agency - are almost life-sized replicas of children with handicaps. The puppets talk to the children through the V.I.A. volunteers to convey specific information about each handicap. The next five units consist of our own team of specialists using their expertise, films, slides, tapes, and other materials to sensitize the children to the needs of people with handicaps. The curriculum for each teaching unit was developed by the individual specialist and the Coordinator of Special Education.<sup>3</sup>

### Attitudes toward the Handicapped

The attitudes that people have toward persons with handicaps have been the focus of a number of research studies. The findings are that in general people who have handicaps are viewed in a less positive way than are people without handicaps. Such negative attitudes are perhaps one of the biggest road blocks that people with handicaps must face, since they foster rejection and isolation, rather than acceptance or friendship.

Public Law 94-142, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, mandated that all children with handicaps had the right to be placed in the least restrictive educational setting appropriate for their needs. In many cases, the most appropriate setting for a child with a handicap is a regular classroom in a public school. However, the attitudes toward the handicapped child and his/her acceptance by peers may be more important than is the actual physical setting.

In the Quincy Public Schools, it was noted that many children with handicaps were in classrooms with other children who knew nothing about the handicaps. In the lower grades children were likely to ask questions and they wanted to know why other children were different than themselves. In contrast, the children in the upper grades were more apt to stare and be unkind.

Although much has been written about negative attitudes of adults toward people with handicaps, the literature contains relatively few studies which focus on changing children's attitudes toward people with handicaps.<sup>2,7,8,9,10,11,13,14</sup> The Understanding Handicaps program is designed to help non-handicapped elementary students understand and appreciate the special needs and problems of the handicapped. Since 1981 the program has been presented to nine classes.

What follows is a description of four of the presentations and an analysis of the pre-and post-test measures which assess the impact of the program on student attitudes toward the handicapped.

#### Learning Disabilities Unit

Learning Disabilities is a difficult handicap for children to understand since it is not as observable as physical disabilities, some forms of mental retardation, or even visual or hearing impairments. It is very important to make a distinction between the learning disabled and the mentally retarded population since there will probably be children in the classroom with learning problems. To make this distinction, a concept of learning was developed that children could understand. The goal is to have the children become aware of the actual perceptual and motor problems of the learning disabled, to be more understanding of their inability to easily accomplish tasks, and to be more supportive of the effort the learning disabled child must expend.

The presentation begins with an explanation that the handicap which will be discussed is not something that can be seen or felt. It is further noted that the person who has this handicap might not even realize it and that it may cause problems with his sight, hearing, touch, balance, memory, reading, writing, spelling, or even catching a ball. The presenter asks the class if they can guess what the handicap might be. If they are unable to provide the correct answer, they are not told at this point and the presenter explains the "traffic theory" of learning. According to this theory, the brain represents a big city in which the roads are the nerves and the cars are the messages traveling over these roads. The class is asked "What happens when too many cars try to get into the city?" The students always respond with the

appropriate answer - a traffic jam. When asked what can be done to remedy the situation, there is always someone who determines that a detour can be made. Then a similarity can be drawn between the traffic theory and the way in which a child with Learning Disabilities must learn.

It must first be asked, how do children learn. Everyone learns by using the five senses plus the sense of balance. The children are then given the opportunity to feel how either sensory overload or insufficient sensory information can effect motor performance. As an example, they are asked to simultaneously pat the stomach and rub the head, or finger tap a rhythm, or try splitting the second and third fingers. Though this may be difficult at first, it is pointed out that practice on any of these tasks improves performance. The presenter further pursues the problems inherent in poor cerebral organization by giving two activities for each primary "sense" (visual, auditory, tactile, and balance). Children are chosen to participate in these activities while the rest of the class observes the reaction to the task. The most frequent response is how frustrated the child feels as he or she attempts what should be a very easy task.

The presentation is concluded by stressing that Learning Disabilities are not diseases, but that the child with a learning disability does require help from special teachers. It is not that the Learning Disabled child cannot learn, but that he or she learns in a special way - by taking a detour. The class is reminded to be understanding of and sensitive to the feelings and the problems of the child with a learning disability.

### Physical Handicaps Unit

The goal of the unit on Physical Handicaps is to have the children realize that although people with handicaps look different, they are still people with feelings, and that children should not fear a person with a handicap. During the session, the children experience what it is like to have some limitation in physical movement, while becoming familiar with some of the more common types of equipment and prosthetic devices used by people with handicaps.

The presentation begins with the reading of a book entitled About Handicaps.<sup>12</sup> The characters in the sotry include both a boy with cerebral palsy and a man with a prosthetic arm. The book provides pictures to look at, handicapped people to talk about, and uncomfortable feelings to share. In this way, the children start to feel a little bit easier with what once had been strange to them.

After the book is read, the children are asked about their reactions to the story. They are asked if they have ever known or seen someone who walks in a different manner, or who had to wear an artificial arm or leg. A wide variety of feelings are often expressed by the class, and several children usually offer comments or have questions. Quite often the person mentioned with the handicap is a relative of a child and then a more personal note is added to the discussion.

One of the simulations used in the presentation requires the children to write with a physical limitation. The thumb of their non-dominant hand is taped to their palm, and they are asked to write their name, address, and telephone number as quickly as possible. The children are then asked to share their feelings with the class. They usually express feelings of frustration, anxiety, and impatience. They are told that some people with

handicaps experience these feelings all the time when engaging in such everyday activities as eating, writing, dressing, or playing. The children are asked if they think a person with a handicap would find these tasks even harder if others were laughing and making fun of them. Many of the children agree that such tasks would be much more difficult.

At each of the presentations an assortment of equipment used by people with physical handicaps is displayed and a child is allowed to try the equipment if appropriate. A short discussion follows the presentation of each piece of equipment. For example, a child may attempt a task while sitting in a wheelchair. Usually, the classroom is not arranged to accommodate a wheelchair and the child experiences difficulty in manipulating the chair. The children are then asked to compare this experience to using a wheelchair in such places as the restrooms, cafeteria, or the school entrance.

To conclude the presentation, the presenter initiates a discussion with the children as to how they could help a person with a physical disability in their own school and neighborhood.

#### Deafness Unit

The purpose of the unit on deafness is to help make the children aware of people who have hearing disabilities, experience the frustration of these disabilities in a hearing world and expose them to various means of communication of the hearing impaired person.

The presentation begins by signing an introduction:

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a  
teacher here in Quincy. I am here today to tell  
your class a little bit about the hearing im-  
paired person.

By doing this, the children can feel the frustration of not being able to understand what is being communicated to them, just as a deaf person feels the frustration when he cannot understand the communication of a hearing person.

The children are asked to respond as to how they felt when they tried to understand the signing. Usually, the children call out emotional responses of feeling left out, frustrated, lonely, angry, etc.

A filmstrip entitled "Hello, Everybody"<sup>6</sup> is shown which focusses on a twelve year old hearing impaired boy named Danny who explains his feelings, needs and education in the public schools. Danny explains what a hearing loss is, how he sounds when he talks, and the speech therapy instruction he receives in school. He explains different words in sign, and demonstrates fingerspelling.

A discussion then follows of different types of people we see in our hearing world who use signs to communicate specific things: a policeman or crossing guard stopping traffic, a referee of a hockey game or football game, a conductor leading an orchestra, a catcher signaling to the pitcher during a baseball game. The entire class then becomes involved by receiving flash cards with words which they must sign to the rest of the students.

This activity makes the children aware that there are many words that we know and can sign such as telephone, up, down, rain, etc. Frequently the children will also add their own words.

The presentation is concluded by distributing a copy of the manual alphabet to each child and the children then practice fingerspelling their names and common words to one another.

#### Mental Retardation Unit

The purpose of this unit is to help children feel more comfortable and unafraid around children who are mentally retarded. Children need to understand that children with this handicap need to be provided the same opportunity in life to do things that they enjoy, regardless of their level of functioning. This presentation differs from the others in that it is primarily visual, rather than hands-on. The students are told that mental retardation is actually a developmental disability and that there are different degrees or levels within the handicap. Slides are shown of children with mental retardation engaged in various kinds of activities which not only depict the different degrees of the handicap, but also show the differences in physical appearance.

The fear of what actually causes mental retardation is discussed by explaining to the students that there are over 250 ways that it can be caused. They are told that this handicap can occur basically in one of three periods in a person's life: to the child (fetus) or to the mother during the pregnancy, to the child at birth, and to the child after birth. A filmstrip entitled "Hello, Everybody"<sup>5</sup> is shown which generates a discussion focussing in on the different degrees of this handicap. The filmstrip is narrated by a teenage girl who explains what it feels like to be mentally retarded and how she is

able to function in a non-handicapped world. In order to show the potential of the mentally retarded adult, slides are shown of adults successfully employed in the community. The differences between learning disabilities and mental retardation is discussed and then supported by an explanation of the methods used to teach the child with mental retardation.

The example of a young boy named "Bill" is used who is not quite ready to learn to print his first name yet. The special needs teacher would use the five senses (and a combination thereof) to teach Bill each letter. After the children name the five senses, they are challenged to contribute ideas as to how the teacher could teach the letter B for each of the five senses. As students think of different methods, teaching materials are displayed which match the suggestions. An example for each category may include:

- (1) hearing - language master card and machine
- (2) touching - forming a letter B in salt or out of clay
- (3) seeing - concentration games of letters, or outline the letter with a flashlight in a dark room.
- (4&5) tasting and smelling - bake and eat a letter-shaped cookie.

It is explained that this is the manner in which the mentally retarded child is taught. The child is started at something he is able to do well and slowly different methods are used to build upon this learning at the child's own pace. As success is experienced, the teacher moves on to the next step.

Next the children are asked to think of the ways that everyone is similar - both handicapped and non-handicapped. Someone usually responds with the correct answer which is that everyone has feelings. A discussion follows which centers on the fact that although everyone is different, they all seem to share the same feelings about similar experiences.

The presentation is concluded by reminding the children that children do not have to look retarded to be retarded. If they see a mentally retarded child doing something that looks strange or unusual, it does not mean that he is "stupid" or "crazy". It is just that he has not been able to learn the things that others his own age have already learned. The mentally retarded child wants to do as much as he can by himself. He needs caring, understanding, and a chance to learn just like them!

### Results

When the curriculum for the Understanding Handicaps program was developed, a test instrument was also designed to be given to the students. Adapted from the Attitude Toward Handicapped Individuals Scale,<sup>4</sup> this pre- and post-test contains fourteen statements relative to feelings about handicapped persons. Prior to the first presentation, copies of the pre-test are distributed and read to the class. The children are asked to choose one answer ranging on a continuum from "agree a lot" to "disagree a lot". The identical test is then administered at the end of the six week presentation.

The results of the testing provide a measure of the effectiveness of the program. Obviously a number of factors can effect the test results: parental views, socio-economic background, contact with a handicapped person, etc. The involvement of the individual teacher also appears to have an effect

on the post-test results. Those teachers who encouraged class projects and active use of the available materials had classes that show the most positive change. In one school, fifteen of the seventeen students showed marked increases in their positive attitudes toward the handicapped after participating in the program. Among those whose scores showed no improvement were students who scored very high on the pre-test and therefore had little room for improvement.

To date, nine classes or a total of one hundred and eight-one students have participated in the program. Of this number, 64% have shown positive attitudinal change. The findings indicate that students show marked increases in their positive attitudes toward the handicapped and therefore validates the worth of the program.

#### In Conclusion

One of the most important differences between the Understanding Handicaps program in the Quincy Public Schools and similar programs in other school systems is the use of professionals, rather than parents and volunteers as presenters. While volunteers can be useful, it is difficult to obtain totally committed people willing to get deeply involved with a long-term project. The Quincy Public Schools staff have been able to use their experiences in working directly with a large number of students with handicaps to contribute to the program over the last four years.

During the presentations, the teachers remain in the classroom with their classes and are part of the audience. Throughout the six week program, the teachers will encourage their students to learn more about each handicap by reading books, having classroom plays, setting up projects, and giving special assignments. Hopefully this involvement has helped to increase the awareness of the regular education teachers to the needs of children with handicaps.

At the conclusion of the six week program, the Understanding Handicaps staff reassembles at a follow-up meeting to critique the presentations and determines whether the feedback received from the children support the goal of the program. As a result, there have been substantial changes made to the individual presentations. Not only have there been changes in the curriculum and materials, but also in the population to whom the program is presented. The fifth grade, rather than the fourth grade, has been found to be a more receptive group to the Understanding Handicaps program. Although the fourth graders are more open and less inhibited, the fifth graders displayed a higher level of comprehension and asked more intuitive questions. Another change which has taken place is the addition of a unit on Deafness as one of the program presentations. There are plans now to develop a new unit encompassing the behavior disorder handicaps.

The Understanding Handicaps program is constantly being critiqued and improved in order to accomplish its main goal: to improve the attitudes of non-handicapped children toward people with handicaps. As professionals, the staff members have the knowledge, personal contact, and commitment to achieve this goal.

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